

God's Scattered Elect

I Peter 1:1-2

As we begin our study of I Peter, part of my task is to give you some of the background of what was going on in the Church and in the Roman Empire when Peter wrote this letter. Wayne Grudem correctly states that when we study I Peter, we need to first learn its meaning for Peter and his original readers, and then we can work on its proper application to our own lives. Friends, there is one original meaning for every text of Scripture, and then there may be many legitimate applications. But if we badly botch the original meaning, we can make some serious mistakes in how we apply a misunderstood text.

Dr. Grudem goes on to say that when we accept a particular interpretation of any verse it should NOT be,

“. . . because some expert has given his opinion in favor of it, but because we have seen for ourselves the evidence which supports that interpretation, and the evidence has convinced us. Such evidence may come in the form of other texts where the same [key] word . . . is used, illustrating the meaning of [that] word”

Later in this message we will look at a key word found in I Peter. But first, let's take note that the original readers of I Peter were suffering significant persecution when Peter wrote this letter – sometime around A.D. 62-64. However, soon after this letter was sent out to the scattered elect, mentioned in verse 1, there was a great judgment upon those who were persecuting God's elect [as I will shortly point out].

But what do we know about Peter that could be helpful in understanding this letter? The Apostle Paul gives some important

information in **Galatians 2:7-9**. Paul and Barnabas had traveled to Jerusalem and reported on their work among the Gentiles,

“. . . when they [the elders of the Jerusalem Church] saw that I [Paul] had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised [the Gentiles], just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised [the Jews] . . .⁹ they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised” [the Jews].

Peter had significant ministry with both the Jews and the Gentiles. His primary call however, was to make disciples among the Jews. And his home base for doing that was the Church at Jerusalem. This is important to keep in mind because Peter and the other Apostles were aware of something about Jerusalem which weighed heavily on their minds.

Matthew 24:1-3, speaks of it,

“Jesus left the temple [at Jerusalem] and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² But he answered them, ‘You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.’³ As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’”

Jesus answered “when” the temple would be destroyed in **Matthew 24:34**,

“Truly, I say to you [His disciples, who became the Apostles], this generation [in which they lived] will not pass away until all these things have happened.”

In the Jewish mind, a generation was about 40 years, since that was the time it took for the adult generation of Jews in the Exodus, to die off in the wilderness. Within 40 years after Jesus spoke these words, not one stone

of that temple was left upon another.

But notice also that according to Matthew 24:3, the destruction of the temple was also viewed as a coming of Christ AND the end of an age. What age were the disciples living in – when they asked about the end of the age? They were living in the Old Covenant Age, which was characterized by animal sacrifices at a stone temple. The New Covenant had not yet been ushered in when that question was asked – because Christ had not yet become our perfect sacrifice for sin. In other words, the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, was the official end of the Old Covenant Age. When was I Peter written? Around A.D. 62 – 64, which means the end of the Old Covenant Age was at hand – when Peter was writing this letter.

We need to answer another important question at this point. Why would the destruction of the temple be viewed as a coming of Christ? Answer: Because the fall of Jerusalem was a divine judgment against apostate Israel for (1) their ongoing unfaithfulness to God under the Old Covenant; (2) for falsely accusing their Messiah of being a blasphemer, (3) for insisting that the Romans crucify Christ and (4) for their harsh persecution against God's elect – which began at Jerusalem and then spread from there.

Friends, when God judged nations in Old Testament times, it was sometimes called a (1) day of the Lord [Isaiah 13:9-10; Ezekiel 30:1-4, (2) judgement of nations was also called a coming of the Lord [Micah 1:3-6; Isaiah 64:1-4], and (3) sometimes a coming of the Lord on the clouds

[Isaiah 19:1; II Samuel 22:7-16]. But when God the Son came to earth, the Father handed all judgment over to Him in **John 5:22-23**, “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son,²³ that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father.” And so when the Lord Jesus ascended back into heaven, and a nation needed to be judged, who would carry out that judgment? The ascended Lord Jesus.

This is why in Matthew 24:30, Jesus refers to the fall of Jerusalem and the temple’s destruction as a coming of Christ on the clouds. However, this soon coming judgment was not limited to just unbelieving Israel. It included the whole Roman Empire – because of Rome’s persecution of Christians under Caesar Nero. Nero began his sadistic persecution of God’s elect in A.D. 64, after a devastating fire broke out in the city of Rome – for which Nero blamed the unpopular Christians. And so starting in A.D. 64, God’s elect were persecuted by the emperor of Rome and by unbelieving Israel.

However, things began to change in A.D. 66, when the Jews revolted against Rome [a no win decision]. Nero ordered the revolt to be crushed, which began immediately and culminated in A.D. 70, with the temple’s destruction. Nero did not live to see his orders carried out because he lost control of his soldiers and committed suicide in A.D. 68 – which plunged the Roman Empire into civil war. All of this was about to begin in earnest when I Peter was written.

What I say next is vital to hear. Christ’s soon coming judgment upon Nero and apostate Israel, was bad news for the wicked, but it was

deliverance for God's elect. Jesus had promised in Luke 21:26-28, that when the wicked experienced the Son of Man coming on a cloud against them, then Christ's followers were to straighten up and raise their heads because their redemption was drawing near. I believe the entire New Testament was written under the shadow of a fearful judgment upon the wicked and a greatly needed deliverance for the righteous.

This is the backdrop of I Peter. It was a difficult time to be a Christian. And in light of the current darkness of our culture, what Peter says to the elect of his day is very applicable to God's elect today. Let's once again read I Peter 1:1-2,

“Peter, an apostle [a messenger] of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you” [Christians really can experience grace and peace in the midst of darkness].

Who are God's elect exiles of the dispersion and how did they get to all the places listed in I Peter 1:1? I believe Acts 2:5, helps to answer that question. We are told that on the day of Pentecost, which was one of the three major festivals of Judaism, “. . . there were dwelling [visiting] in Jerusalem – Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven” [including all the places listed in I Peter 1:1]. And how did these Jewish people, who came to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, become residents of all those other nations? Probably because of the dispersions of the Jews by the Assyrians [722 B.C.] and then the Babylonians [605 – 586 B.C.]

It was also in Acts 2, when Peter preached his famous sermon and three

thousand Jews repented and placed their trust in Christ, as their Savior and King. After these new converts, from all over the Roman Empire, were grounded in the faith by the Apostles, they returned to their homes and began to share the good news of the gospel with their family and friends. This helped to jump-start the spread of Christ's Kingdom. Unfortunately, those who rejected the gospel, began to spread horrible lies about Christians. For example, when followers of Christ had their love feasts, before taking communion, unbelievers said they were engaging in sexual orgies – and afterwards they would practice cannibalism by eating someone's flesh and drinking his blood. Due to these lies and others, Nero found Christians to be an easy target to blame for the fire at Rome. Of course we all know that if you are Christian in the United States in 2019, then you are narrowminded, hateful, and should not be allowed out in public. This assessment doesn't exactly boost a person's self-esteem – which is why we need to hear what Peter tells the despised Christians of his day concerning who they were in Christ: (1) They were God's elect – known before the foundation of the world. That is a hugely comforting truth for me as a Christian and therefore one of God's elect. It is a truth that makes me feel loved and grateful. It doesn't make me prideful to understand that God took the initiative in my salvation. If He hadn't, I would still be running from God – because I innately knew that if I got what I deserved it would be real bad.

(2) As God's elect they were being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. I need to tell all of you this morning that the Christian life is

not difficult – it is impossible – if we try to live it by our own strength. Granted, as a Christian, I have a new nature which I gained when I was born again. And praise God, my new nature desires to do God’s will. The rub is that my new nature has no more power than my old nature had goodness. The power to live the Christian life comes from the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is a supernatural life from the beginning to the end.

(3) Peter reminds the Christians of his day and Christians today that the Holy Spirit transforms us – so we can be obedient to Jesus Christ, who has cleaned us from all of our sins, imputed His righteousness into our accounts and given us an eternal home with the Triune God. And so let me ask, do we treasure God’s call to us to be a part of His eternal family? Do we humbly walk in holiness by the power of the Holy Spirit? And out of gratitude and love, are we focused on serving Christ – which includes serving people?

There is one more background issue I want to address, which pertains to where Peter wrote this letter. Normally the location of where a book was written is not that big of a deal, but it is in I Peter. We are given the answer in I Peter 5:12-13,

“By Silvanus [also known as Silas], a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you [Silas may have delivered this letter – or perhaps wrote down the words of this letter while Peter dictated them], exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God [there were many false teachers who had invaded the churches of Peter’s day]. Stand firm in it [the true faith]. She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son.”

What did Peter mean by Babylon? We know from the Old Testament

that the nation of Babylon had been an enemy of God's people; but when Peter was writing this letter, the city of Babylon had been a desolate mess for hundreds of years. It was not the place where Peter wrote this letter. There are many fine people who have concluded that Peter's Babylon was the city of Rome. And I understand how they could arrive at that. But I am going to provide you with some evidences for why I believe Peter was referring to Jerusalem, which was his home base for ministering to the Jews. To see this evidence, we need to look at the Babylon mentioned in

Revelation 17:1-5,

“Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls [full of God's wrath] came and said to me [John], ‘Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute . . . ² with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality . . . ³ And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it [the beast] had seven heads . . . ⁴ [the woman was] holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. ⁵ And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.”

It should be clear that the woman is different from the beast upon which she rides. The woman is described as the mother of prostitutes with Babylon the great written on her forehead. This is helpful in identifying the woman because all through the Old Testament, unbelieving Israel is referred to as a prostitute. **Isaiah 1:21**, says of Jerusalem, “How the faithful city has become a harlot, she who was full of justice!” Jeremiah 3:1-13; the entire chapter of Ezekiel 16, and the whole book of Hosea give details about Old Covenant Israel's spiritual harlotry with the nations.

Jesus continually referred to the Jews of His day as an adulterous generation. I believe Israel's greatest act of harlotry was in rejecting her Messiah.

Notice what else **Revelation 17:6**, says about the prostitute, "And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus." Keep that in mind as I read what the Lord Jesus said about the unbelieving Jews of His day in **Matthew 23:29-37**,

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! . . . ³⁴ I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, ³⁵ so that on you may come [guilt of] all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. ³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things [divine judgments] will come upon this generation. ³⁷ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!"

That is some serious condemnation upon Jerusalem. John gets even clearer about who this woman represents in **Revelation 17:18**, "And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion [literally has a kingdom] over the kings of the earth." Many conclude that this must be speaking about Rome. But where did Christ begin His kingdom? At Jerusalem. A Kingdom that was destined to spread into all the world. But we don't need to guess who the great city is referring to because we are told in **Revelation 11:8**, which speaks about the deaths of two prophetic witnesses for Christ,

"and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt [and Babylon], where their Lord

was crucified.”

The great city is Jerusalem – symbolized by a prostitute with Babylon written on her forehead. And may I explain that the reason Israel so often ran after the false idols of the nations, is because there was a lot of sexual immorality associated with the idolatry of that time. In case you haven’t noticed, America has an enormous problem with sex. Abortion for any and every reason and same sex marriages are two of the offspring of our idolatrous affair with sex.

While I believe that I Peter was written from Jerusalem, I also believe that not long after Peter wrote it, he and Paul were martyred at Rome by the hand of Nero – which is why there is no question in my mind that the beast of **Revelation 17:9-10**, is the Roman Empire of Peter’s day. But why is the prostitute [unbelieving Israel] said to ride on the beast [Rome]? Because the unbelieving Jews got Rome to do their dirty work in crucifying Christ. Let’s look at vv 9-10,

“This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads [of the beast] are seven mountains on which the woman is seated [Rome was called the city on seven hills. It was stamped on some of their coins]; ¹⁰ they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen [died], one is [he was ruling the Roman Empire when John wrote the book of Revelation], the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while.”

The kings would obviously be Roman Kings. The five who had fallen begin with 1. **Julius Caesar** (46-44 B.C.) He is also the head referred to in Revelation 13:3. When he was assassinated it appeared that his lineage was ended. But against all odds, his great nephew, who he had selected to follow him, became the next king.

2. **Caesar Augustus** (27 B.C. - A.D. 14) He was the Emperor of the Roman Empire when Christ was born.
3. **Caesar Tiberius** (A.D. 14-37) was the Emperor when Christ was crucified, risen and ascended.
4. **Caligula** ruled the Roman Empire from (A.D. 37-41)
5. **Claudius** ruled from (A.D. 41-54).
6. **Nero** ruled from (A.D. 54-68) – He was the sixth king, which means Nero was the reigning emperor when John wrote Revelation.
7. **Galba** briefly ruled from (A.D. 68-69), but only lasted six or seven months before being killed.

The evidence that Nero was ruling the Roman Empire when Revelation was written means the book of Revelation was written no later than A.D. 68. This observation strongly indicates that the judgments listed in Revelation are primarily focused on the prostitute – which was Jerusalem, the capital of apostate, Old Covenant Israel.

When Peter was writing this letter, he knew that Old Covenant Israel was taking its last breaths. But he also knew that the New Covenant Church was just getting started – and that great trials, as well as great blessings were ahead – blessings that even the angels long to see [I Peter 1:10-12].

Good people differ with me on what I have just shared with you. These are not salvation issues. But it has helped my understanding of I Peter and the entire New Testament to realize it was all written under the shadow of an enormous judgment against the wicked, referred to in the New

Testament as a coming of the Lord, a day of the Lord and a coming of Christ on the clouds. Wicked people were persecuting God's elect – at a time when Christ's Church was small and very vulnerable to being wiped out. But our glorious, ascended Lord Jesus was far greater than the enemies of the Church in Peter's day. And He continues to be far greater than the enemies of the Church today. This is why Christians living in 2019, need to believe and live the way Peter exhorted the Christians of his day to believe and live. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word, which was alive and power when it was written and is alive and powerful today. Help us to study it well, believe it well and live it well. Amen